

## **General Comments on Genesis 37-48**

These chapters present the longest single continuous narrative in the book of Genesis, and one of the longest in the entire Bible.

While the narrative depicts a series of historical events that puts Joseph, and later Israel, into Egypt, the narrative is about providence. The Lord is aware of the bad feelings the brothers have towards Joseph, and knowing drought was imminent, He takes advantage of a bad situation to have Joseph placed in Egypt in circumstances that would change his arrogance, as well as provide a means of saving the rest of the family when the drought hits. Thus, the Lord works to keep His covenant with Abraham by engineering events to serve His purposes.

Additionally, the events in the story provide a family case study. Even though the family relations were less than ideal, the Lord was still working with them to manage the outcome. This example shows the efforts God will go to keep His covenants and to encourage people to become righteous.

### **A Deeply Flawed Family: Prelude and Summary**

The story of Joseph starts in 15:13-14 when the Lord predicts Abraham's descendant's captivity among foreigners. This prediction is vague and ambiguous, and not precisely fulfilled.

The next event is Leah and Rachel's marriage to Jacob, where Rachel was the preferred wife over Leah. Leah is held below Rachel in Jacob's esteem, despite her bearing four sons to Jacob. The family dynamic is expressed in 29:31-35, with the first appearance of the Hebrew term "[sane](#)", meaning "hate", appears, which reappears in 37:4. In 29:31-35, Leah expresses her frustration in being the hated (29:31) wife despite bearing four sons, the first named "Reuben" because the Lord has seen her affliction, then "Simeon" because the Lord has heard she is unloved (Hebr. "sane"), then "Levi" hoping Jacob will be attached to him, and finally she gives up hope on Jacob and praises the Lord for being good to her with "Judah". The family tragedy is Jacob's rejection of Leah carries through to her sons.

The next incident in the story is in 33:2 when Jacob puts Rachel and Joseph last when fearing attack by Esau. This is an unmistakably clear sign they are Jacob's favorites to all of the others when the sons are old enough to understand what is happening. In ch. 33 the boys are likely too young to

understand their mother's grief and have the larger family issues affect them directly, here they are not.

The next section is ch. 34 where Simeon and Levi endanger the entire family because of their vigilante justice against the city of Shechem and Hamor. Jacob explicitly chastises them, and the entire family moves out of fear of being attacked in retribution (cf. 35:1-7). This clearly positions them poorly with Jacob.

The final event in the lead-up to our current story is 35:22, where Reuben lays with Bilhah, disgracing himself. He is the firstborn of Leah and therefore the firstborn of all of the sons, but Jacob prefers Joseph over him, and his laying with Bilhah gives Jacob a legitimate reason for rejecting him as heir (this ultimately leaves Judah, the fourth son of Leah, as the potential heir, with his three older brothers having impeached themselves; which we see this play out in the final blessing in 49:8, but in the context of the present story this is a non-issue, as Jacob prefers Joseph, the first-born of Rachel, over Judah, the fourth-borne of Leah).

Given these preceding events, it is plain the animosity between the brothers is an extension of Jacob's persistent favoritism between wives and their sons. The "sane", hatred, shown Leah is returned to Joseph by Leah's sons. We then start the text at hand:

37 - Jacob spoils Joseph, first-born son of Rachel, and the older brothers of the hated Leah then hate Joseph; Joseph dreams and arrogantly tells the entire family about his dreams, and his brothers initially want to murder him, but instead decide to enslave him, but he ends up being enslaved by Ishmaelites instead.

38 - Judah marries his son to a Canaanite woman, then deprives her of sons, so she seduces the unwitting Judah for an heir, who then plans on having her executed for playing the adulteress, only to discover it was he himself who impregnated her, to his utter humiliation, he spares her rather than doubling down on his sin.

39 - Joseph's initial success in Egypt undone by his master's lascivious wife framing him out of spite and he is imprisoned.

40 - Joseph successfully interprets dreams while imprisoned, but is forgotten and left imprisoned.

41 - Pharaoh dreams, Joseph interprets the dreams, is made a leader in Egypt.

42 - Famine forces Jacob's sons to Egypt who are unwitting as to who Joseph is, Joseph challenges them, Simeon held hostage, Simeon abandoned by Jacob.

43 - Famine continues, forcing them to return with Benjamin, whom they take to Joseph.

44 - Joseph entraps Benjamin to test the other brothers to see if they turn on him, instead Judah offers himself in his place, breaking Joseph's hardened heart.

45 - Joseph reveals the truth, confesses the Lord's hand.

46 - Lord tells Jacob to move to Egypt, which they do.

47 - Famine continues, Pharaoh ends up owning all of Egypt, with the exception of Jacob and his family.

48 - Jacob takes Joseph's first two sons and blesses them, correcting Joseph.

The Lord told Abraham his descendants would be in captivity, but be delivered by Himself. The details in between are left to how Abraham's children behave in the interim. In the case of Jacob and his wives and sons, the way Jacob treated them causes unnecessary grief and suffering for all involved. Everyone in the family suffers here, none in the family are spared as hate and mistrust run their course. None of that was required by the Lord, it was a natural consequence of their own actions. Instead of the family being filled with love and compassion and helping each other through their difficulties, they are instead exacerbated by their internal conflict. But, regardless, the Lord works through and around these events to get the outcome He requires.

The warning to the reader is the Lord isn't necessarily going to make everyone's lives easier or more pleasant while in the process of working on keeping His covenant with Abraham. Leah suffered personally, as did her sons, all the while the Lord was blessing her. It wasn't until her focus changed with the birth of her fourth son that her suffering over her bad relationship with her husband appears to have been assuaged.

Jacob didn't have to treat her like this, just because Laban deceived him. She didn't deceive him, her father did. Had Jacob let go of that and focused on what the Lord was trying to accomplish, they all would have had a much easier time of it. In many instances, we make our own lot worse in day to day life by not changing our will to the Lord's will.

### **Theology: Lord as Social Engineer**

In preceding chapters we see the Lord acting behind the scenes to protect the protagonist, despite their occasional shortcomings (cf. ch. 20, 27). But, here in these chapters, we see the Lord bringing about His will despite persistent bad behavior of the people in the narrative, with particular emphasis on Jacob and Joseph. The two supporting characters of Reuben and Judah are both questionable characters as well. The series of conflicts in the story are almost entirely a result of the bad behavior of these characters (i.e., Potiphar's wife being an exception). However, as the story continues, all of them become better men as a result of their self-inflicted problems when they are humbled by circumstances.

Jacob seems to change the least. Joseph's afflictions apparently change him the most, with his change being at least partly a result of Reuben and Judah's confessions after going through their own suffering (Notably absent from the story are Simeon and Levi's confessions, leaving the reader to believe there was none.).

This story is a masterful presentation of subtlety as the text shows the reader how deeply flawed people still end up fulfilling the Lord's predictions with His gentle nudging and providential connections. These people are far from perfect, but the Lord still works with them despite their imperfections to keep the covenant made with Abraham, and hopefully make them better people as well.

The story also presents the Lord as a deliberate master and guide of human history for their benefit. Competing theologies of the time had gods that were selfish, capricious, vain and destructive (e.g., [Enuma Elish](#), [Epic of Gilgamesh](#)). Here, the Lord is the exact opposite. He is remarkably patient and guides the protagonist to success, despite their own flaws and difficult circumstances.

### **Theology: Transition from Individual to Corporate Covenants**

These chapters close the book of Genesis and transition the

narrative to the book of Exodus. The preceding part of Genesis focuses squarely on the one-on-one interaction between the Lord and the early patriarchs, where Exodus focuses on corporate theology. In between these two accounts is the story of Joseph, where we see this transition occurring. Joseph doesn't have a theophany like his father and great-grandfather, he has inspired dreams and the ability to miraculously interpret other's dreams, and depth of insight into the Lord's workings that most overlook. The transition between Jacob and Joseph is so clear that after all of Joseph's experiences and his confession of the Lord's providence in ch. 45, the Lord still provides a theophany to Jacob in 46:1-4, with none to Joseph. That the ultimate result of Israel's captivity in Egypt was the Lord's intention the entire time is made clear in 15:13-14, but the events between ch. 15 and 45 gives us the details of the practical reality of how the Lord's prediction was fulfilled:

The story of Joseph and his brothers differs markedly from the preceding patriarchal narratives. By far the longest and most complete narrative in Genesis, it is set forth by a master storyteller who employs with consummate skill the novelistic techniques of character delineation, psychological manipulation, and dramatic suspense. Another unique feature is the outwardly "secular" mold in which the narrative is cast, the miraculous or supernatural element being conspicuously absent. There are no direct divine revelations or communication to Joseph. He builds no altars. He has no associations with cultic centers. God never openly and directly intervenes in his life. No wonder that Joseph is not included among the patriarchs (cf. Exod. 2:24) and that Jewish tradition restricts that category to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ber. 16b). Nevertheless, the secularity of the story is superficial, for the narrative is infused with a profound sense that God's guiding hand imparts meaning and direction to seemingly haphazard events: when Joseph is lost he meets "a man" who knows exactly where his brothers are (37:15) ; the caravans of traders happen to be going to Egypt (37:25,28); the Lord is with Joseph in Potiphar's house (39:2) and in prison (39:21f). It is significant that the name of God comes readily to Joseph's lips at critical moments: when he is confronted by Potiphar's wife (39:9); when he interprets dreams (40:8, 41:16 et seq.); and when he tests his brothers (42:18). The ultimate interpretation of events is given by Joseph himself at the dramatic conclusion of the

narrative: "God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (45:7,8). (Nahum Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis, page 254)

This shift in narrative shows Israel that the expectation for them is not that they need to essentially emulate Abraham and Jacob, but rather transition to a different model where the individual lives a moral life regardless of those around them and is cognizant of the Lord's hand in their life and in the larger world.

Absent the narrative transition of Joseph, the devout reader might conclude that Moses was akin to the original patriarchs and the reader is to ideally emulate Moses among a generally faithless Israel. The Joseph narrative undercuts that reading by placing Joseph squarely in the line of the patriarchs and yet not essentially like them in every way. Joseph is a man who through trials discovers role in the Lord's greater plan. He is a descendant of Abraham, fulfilling the covenant of Abraham, but not like Abraham in every way, and not expected to be.

This transition from individual to corporate theology spreads to non-Israelite nations as well, with Egypt being brought into Israel's larger story, presented as a means of preserving Israel. This clearly suggests the Lord's social engineering extends well beyond the Israelite nation (e.g., consider the way Mormon contrasts the Jaredites in the Book of Mormon with the Lehitites), it is just that the covenant with Israel is a specific conditional relationship.

Finally, note in the Book of Mormon account in 2 Ne. 3:6-21, there is an account of what is apparently a theophany given to Joseph, which is clearly later in his life, that provides a revelatory backing to the events of Gen. 50:22-26. From a rhetorical point of view, the Joseph from the 2 Ne. 3 account is considerably different in presentation than the Joseph of the Gen. 37-48. Both the same person, but for the theological task at hand, significantly different presentations.

### **Literary Style: Conversation and Contention**

The Joseph narrative revolves around the conversations and lack of conversations between the various participants. Naturally, there are significant events, but the narrative is

driven by the conversations, and the text goes to considerable length to document those in detail. As such, the reader should note the content and context of those conversations for meaning.

Early in the narrative, the conversations and lack thereof are entirely causing contention. Jacob is using Joseph as something of a spy to check and report on his brothers, and they know it. The result is they cannot speak to him at all (cf. 37:4, see comments below on the Hebrew of this verse). The middle of the narrative is decided by conversations between Joseph and his various owners and cell mates. The end of the narrative revolves around conversations between Joseph and his unwitting brothers, whom he tests and challenges to see if they are still the same. The conversations reveal his brothers have changed, while he still holds on to hard feelings, which eventually break as a result of Judah's emotional confession in chapter 44.

The narrative means to highlight the power of speaking, for both good and ill.

### **Literary Style: Pathos**

The Joseph narrative also brings considerably more pathos into the text than the preceding patriarchs. There were isolated cases of pathos (cf. 15:1-6, 16:2-13, 30:1-3), but the present text places considerably more emphasis on that portion of the narrative.

The stories about the last patriarch form a coherent whole, leading some to dub it a "novella." It stands well on its own, although it has been consciously and artfully woven together into both the Yaakov cycle and the entire book.

Initially the tale is one of family emotions, and it is in fact extreme emotions which give it a distinctive flavor. All the major characters are painfully expressive of their feelings, from the doting father to the spoiled son, from the malicious brothers to the lustful wife of Potifar, from the nostalgic adult Yosef to the grief-stricken old Yaakov. It is only through the subconscious medium of dreams, in three sets, that we are made to realize that a higher plan is at work which will supersede the destructive force of these emotions.

For this is a story of how "ill"—with all its connotations of fate, evil, and disaster—is changed to good. Despite the constant threat of death to Yosef, to the

Egyptians, and to Binyamin, the hidden optimistic thrust of the story is "life," a word that appears in various guises throughout. Even "face," the key word of the Yaakov cycle which often meant something negative, is here given a kinder meaning, as the resolution to Yaakov's life. (Everett Fox, The Five Books of Moses, page 173)

**Human Psychology: The Effects of Bad Parenting  
or  
Joseph, Judah, Reuben and Simeon**

In this story we see Jacob playing favorites among his sons, depending solely on their mother. Their individual behavior has little to do with how they are treated by their father, and it greatly affects all of the sons and ultimately the entire family. The division between Joseph and the others is clearly a result of this favoritism, and drives Joseph's mistrust and repeated tests of their loyalty to Benjamin immediately preceding their reunification.

Judah leaves the family, acculturates with the locals, undergoes considerable hardship, and is finally forced to return to his family by the famine. Tamar is presumably part of the returning family, as the son she bears is counted in Judah's lineage through that family, adding to his humiliation. But, Judah returns Benjamin home safely and ultimately reunites the family, which results in him being the lead among the brothers.

Reuben should be the leader of the family, being the firstborn son, but his tryst with Bilhah (cf. 34:22) appears to have undermined his credibility such that when he tries to be the leader among the brothers, Jacob rejects him (cf. 42:36-38), accepting Judah instead (cf. 43:3-10).

Simeon's violence (cf. ch. 34) appears to have impeached him as well, as when he is left in jail in Egypt (cf. 42:29-34), Jacob utterly abandons him, counting him as lost. It is obvious Jacob prefers Benjamin over Simeon, refusing to even risk Benjamin's well-being when Simeon is held hostage. And it is not until Benjamin's life is at risk that Jacob is emotionally involved in the outcome of his children (cf. 43:14).

Jacob's unequal treatment has been consistent through his entire life (cf. 33:1-2), and this unequal treatment was passed down through his sons (cf. 45:14-15, 45:21-22). But, lest we judge Jacob too harshly, recall that Isaac treated his sons Esau and Jacob unfairly as well (cf. 25:27-28). Jacob was perpetuating what he grew up in, and did not correct the inequalities he experienced, he likely made it worse by



continuing the pattern across twelve sons instead of just two.

It is clear through the story of Joseph that Jacob's treatment of the sons contributes significantly to the animosity and problems. In the end the Lord works it all out for the net good of all, but there was a great deal of unnecessary suffering and misery along the way that was purely caused by human actions. The Lord had to work around the bad decision making to ensure the covenant with Abraham was kept. Joseph realizes this in the end (cf. 45:4-8), but how much of the human-caused unpleasantry was necessary to bring about the Lord's goals? Probably none. Had Isaac been a better father, and Jacob been a better father, the story would have been much different. And, that is the likely intent of the text, to teach the men to be better fathers to their sons, so they can avoid all of the unnecessary suffering that is the result of playing favorites among the children.

## **Comments on Genesis 37**

### **The Joseph Apocryphon**

Joseph is a spoiled brat. He tattles on his brothers (v. 2), and flaunts his father Jacob's preferential treatment of him in his brother's faces (v. 3). They are sick of him, cannot stand him at all (v. 4). Joseph goes on and on about dreams he has where he is superior to all of them, even bragging about it to his parents (v. 5-10). His brothers are resentful, while his father questions their meaning (v. 11).

When the brothers are far from home, Jacob sends Joseph to check on them so he can report back (v. 12-14). When the brothers see him coming their anger reaches a head and they plan to murder him (v. 18-20). Reuben, the oldest, isn't as blinded by rage as the others and plans on a trick to preserve Joseph. Reuben suggest they throw him into a pit in the wilderness and leave him there to die, all the while secretly planning on rescuing him (v. 21-22). When Joseph shows up, his brothers strip him of the ornate tunic, which was an ostentatious gift from their father, and throw him into the pit (v. 23-24), a dry well, which is deep enough he cannot escape (v. 24). The pit was far from where the brothers were camped with the flocks.

Returning from the pit to the camp they sit down to eat, and see off in the distance an Ishmaelite caravan traveling to Egypt (v. 25). Judah also tries to prevent Joseph's death and comes up with an idea to dispose of Joseph without killing him:

they'll sell him to the caravan going to Egypt (v. 26-27).

However, while the brothers are away from the pit eating lunch, Midianite traders happen to pass by the pit, and pull Joseph out of it, later selling him to Ishmaelites as a slave (v. 28).

While the other brothers are eating lunch, Reuben sneaks back to the pit to save Joseph only to discover he is missing (v. 29). He does not know what has happened to Joseph, so he laments his fate, fearing the worst (v. 30).

The brothers, not knowing what happened to Joseph, go ahead with the original plan and tell their father Jacob was killed in the wilderness by a wild beast and all that is left is the bloody tunic (v. 31-32). Jacob greatly laments the apparent death of Joseph (v. 33-35).

Joseph ends up being sold as a servant to the house of Potiphar, the Pharaoh's chief steward (v. 36).

1 AND Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. 2 These [are] the generations of Jacob. Joseph, [being] seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad [was] with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he [was] the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of [many] colours. 4 And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

v1-4 Jacob inherits the land of Canaan, the promised to his fathers (v. 1). Jacob's sons are shepherds. Jacob favors his son Joseph over his other sons. Jacob takes advantage of his status to disparage his half-brothers born through the concubines Bilhah and Zilpah (v. 2). Jacob's favoritism of Joseph is plainly manifested in his giving him a rather ornate tunic, which none of the other brothers receive (v. 3). The other brothers are jealous and angry over their father's preferential treatment of Joseph, so much so they are filled with hatred for him and cannot speak to him (v. 4).

v2 "their evil report", in other words, Joseph returned deliberately unfavorable reports about his brothers to their father. Compare the "evil reports" of Num. 13:32 which were biased and inaccurate.

Also note Joseph appears to be particularly targeting the sons of the concubines, whereas he is the son of a fully legal wife. And not just that, he is the son of Jacob's first loved

wife, Rachel. His arrogance over this point is exhibited in the dreams he has wherein only his mother is interpreted to be the moon and the other mothers are excluded (v. 9-10).

v3 "coat of many colors", the Jewish Publication Society translation renders this "an ornamented tunic" and their Torah Commentary on Genesis states:

The precise meaning of the Hebrew ketone passim remains unclear. In 2 Sam. 13:18-19 the garment mentioned as the distinctive dress of virgin daughters of royalty. Josephus describes it as "a long-sleeved tunic reaching to the ankle". In Aramaic and rabbinic Hebrew pas means the palm of the hand and the sole of the foot. Radak took passim to mean "striped". The Septuagint and Vulgate rendered the Hebrew "a robe of many colors".

Ancient Near Eastern art may shed some light on the subject. An Egyptian tomb painting at Beni-hasan from about 1890 B.C.E. features a Semitic clan with the men and women wearing multicolored tunics draped over one shoulder and reaching below the knees. Another Egyptian tomb has a representation of Syrian ambassadors bringing tribute to Tutankhamen. They are dressed in elaborately designed long robes wrapped around the body and over the shoulders. A mural fresco in the palace of King Zimri-lim at Mari, in southeastern Syria, shows figures dressed in garments made of many small rectangular panels of multicolored cloth. The discovery of a "pas garment" (lbs psm) in a list of various articles of clothing from the town of Ugarit, dated not earlier than the thirteenth century B.C.E., provides a parallel to the biblical phrase but little clarification.

v4 "could not speak peaceably to him", this phrase is translated variously:

And his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. (NASB)

And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him. (JPS)

However, the most literal translation of Hebrew to English is "they could not speak him to peace", meaning their hatred of him precluded them having any kind of discussion over them reconciling with Joseph. See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' [discussion](#), which highlights the ability of conversation to avoid violence. The brother's anger and jealousy was so extreme they could not talk to Joseph about how bad the situation was between them, and the result is they conspire to commit violence against him.

And underlying implication of the text is with Joseph acting as a spy for his Jacob, anything the brothers would say to Joseph would immediately be reported to Jacob. If they were to vent their frustration, it would be reported. Anything short of a perfectly and flawlessly delivered presentation that resulted in their complete reconciliation would be reported negatively to their father. And, at their relatively young age, they simply aren't capable of such maturity, as their anger is clearly overwhelming.

5 And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told [it] his brethren: and they hated him yet the more. 6 And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: 7 For, behold, we [were] binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. 8 And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. 9 And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. 10 And he told [it] to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, what [is] this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? 11 And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.

v5-11 Joseph has dreams wherein he sees himself as the patriarch and leader of the family, even his father will bow to him (v. 5-7, 9). He tells his family about the dreams and his brothers are enraged by it (v. 8), and even his father reprimands him for speaking such things (v. 10). While his brother are jealous and angry over the visions, Jacob gives them careful consideration (v. 11).

v10 "his father rebuked him", the reader is informed in v. 11 that Jacob observed the saying, or he heard it and considered

it's meaning. The rebuke must therefore be for something besides the content of the dream itself. Jacob is probably censuring his son for being so arrogant as to share this dream with his brothers. The visions are given to Joseph, and what does he do with them? He tells his brothers and father they will all bow down to him. His focus at present is solely upon himself.

"thy mother", Joseph's dream is of a sun, moon, and eleven stars. The dream is interpreted to have the sun being Jacob, the eleven stars as his brothers and the moon as his own mother. What of Jacob's other wives, the mothers of his brothers? In the interpretation of the dream, Joseph fails to present the moon as the wives of Jacob and instead presents it as only his mother.

v11 The NASB translates this verse as, "And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying *in mind*." This is probably an allusion to the purloined blessing from 27:29, where Isaac blessed Jacob with primacy over Esau, which Jacob heard firsthand. This primacy is apparently transferred from Joseph to Judah in 49:8.

12 And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. 13 And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed [the flock] in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here [am I]. 14 And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. 15 And a certain man found him, and, behold, [he was] wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, what seekest thou? 16 And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed [their flocks]. 17 And the man said, They are departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan. 18 And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. 19 And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. 20 Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams. 21 And Reuben heard [it], and he delivered him out of their hands; and said, Let us not kill him. 22 And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, [but] cast him into this pit that [is] in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again.

v12-22 The older brothers are away from home tending the flocks and Jacob sends Joseph to check up on them (v. 12-17). When they see him coming they conspire to kill him (18-20). One of the brothers seeks to thwart the murder of his brother by persuading them against such an evil act (v. 21). Rather, he plots to deliver him from his brothers (v. 22).

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, [his] coat of [many] colours that [was] on him; 24 And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit [was] empty, [there was] no water in it. 25 And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry [it] down to Egypt. 26 And Judah said unto his brethren, what profit [is it] if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? 27 Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he [is] our brother [and] our flesh. And his brethren were content. 28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty [pieces] of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. 29 And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph [was] not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. 30 And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child [is] not; and I, whither shall I go?

v23-30 When Joseph arrives they strip him of his beloved tunic and throw him into a pit so he cannot escape (v. 23-24). They notice a band of Ishmaelite traders passing in the distance and decide to sell Joseph into slavery rather than leave him to die (v. 25-27). But, in the meantime, a group of Midianites had passed by a found Joseph in the pit, and they pull him out, sell him into slavery to the Ishmaelites who ultimately take him to Egypt (v. 28). When Reuben sneaks to the pit to free Joseph, he discovers he is already gone and is terribly upset about it, fearing the worst (v. 29). He returns to his brothers and tells them Joseph is gone (v. 30).

v26-27 Judah's "compassion" for Joseph because he is their brother is indicative of how hated he was, that selling your brother into slavery instead of murdering him outright is an act of kindness. Among the brothers, only Reuben is willing to do the right thing. Judah's actions here are better than the other brothers, but still not good. We would have to assume Benjamin was not among this group as he was younger than Joseph.

v28 The Midianites might have heard Joseph calling, or they might have stopped at the well (v. 24) to see if there was water available there, and instead find Joseph.

31 And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; 32 And they sent the coat of [many] colours, and they brought [it] to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it [be] thy son's coat or no. 33 And he knew it, and said, [It is] my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. 34 And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.

v31-36 The brothers genuinely don't know where Joseph is anymore, and they assume he is dead (cf. 44:20) so they follow through on their original plan and manufacture evidence of Joseph's being killed by lion and show it to their father (v. 31-32). Joseph is terribly grieved at the apparent loss of his favorite son and mourns him (v. 33-34). His grief is so terrible none of the family can console him (v. 35), and he even wishes he was dead so he could be with Joseph (v. 36).

v34-35 Jacob is inconsolable, and possibly hysterical, at the loss of Joseph. This would yet be another clear indication of Joseph being the favorite, as the other eleven brothers and all of the daughters are there trying to comfort him, and it just doesn't matter to him. For those eleven brothers, it is clear they don't measure up.

v35 Jacob apparently had more daughters than just Dinah, as there is nothing in the context to suggest these are daughters-in-law.

36 And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, [and] captain of the guard.

v36 While the family believes Joseph is dead, he is in fact sold into slavery in Egypt at the house of Pharaoh's captain of the guard.

"Midianites", in this verse the KJV translate the Hebrew to "Midianites", but the Hebrew has a unique term "medani", which is different from the "midyani" in v. 28. In 39:1 the text indicates it was the Ishmaelites who brought Joseph to Egypt,

but says nothing of the final sales transaction. There is no critical consensus on how to reconcile the three different names used. Some equate all three as cousins in the same family and are therefore equivocal and they therefore conclude it was in fact Joseph's brothers who sold Joseph to the Midianite/Ishmaelite/Medanites. Some say there were three different groups of people involved in the sale: the Midianites pulled Joseph out of the pit and then quickly sold him to the Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt and they sold him to Medanites at Egypt who ran the slave bazaar at Egypt who sold him to Potiphar's household.

Attempting to equate all three into one and attributing the sale to the brothers seems impossible, as it is clear there are at least two different groups involved give the documented sales transaction of v. 28 and Reuben's reaction to Joseph being missing in v. 29. The reading with the least internal difficulty is there were three different groups involved in Joseph's sale, none of which were Joseph's brothers.

"captain of the guard", the JPS translation footnotes indicate the Hebrew term used here is obscure. It is unclear what position Potiphar held. Regardless, from ch. 39, it is clear Potiphar owned an estate, with house and adjoining land, sufficiently large to require a force of slave labor to run operations. Potiphar was not a peasant.

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